

THE LAST MONGGHUL PLOWMAN IN 2019: HUZHU COUNTY, QINGHAI PROVINCE, PR CHINA

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ABSTRACT

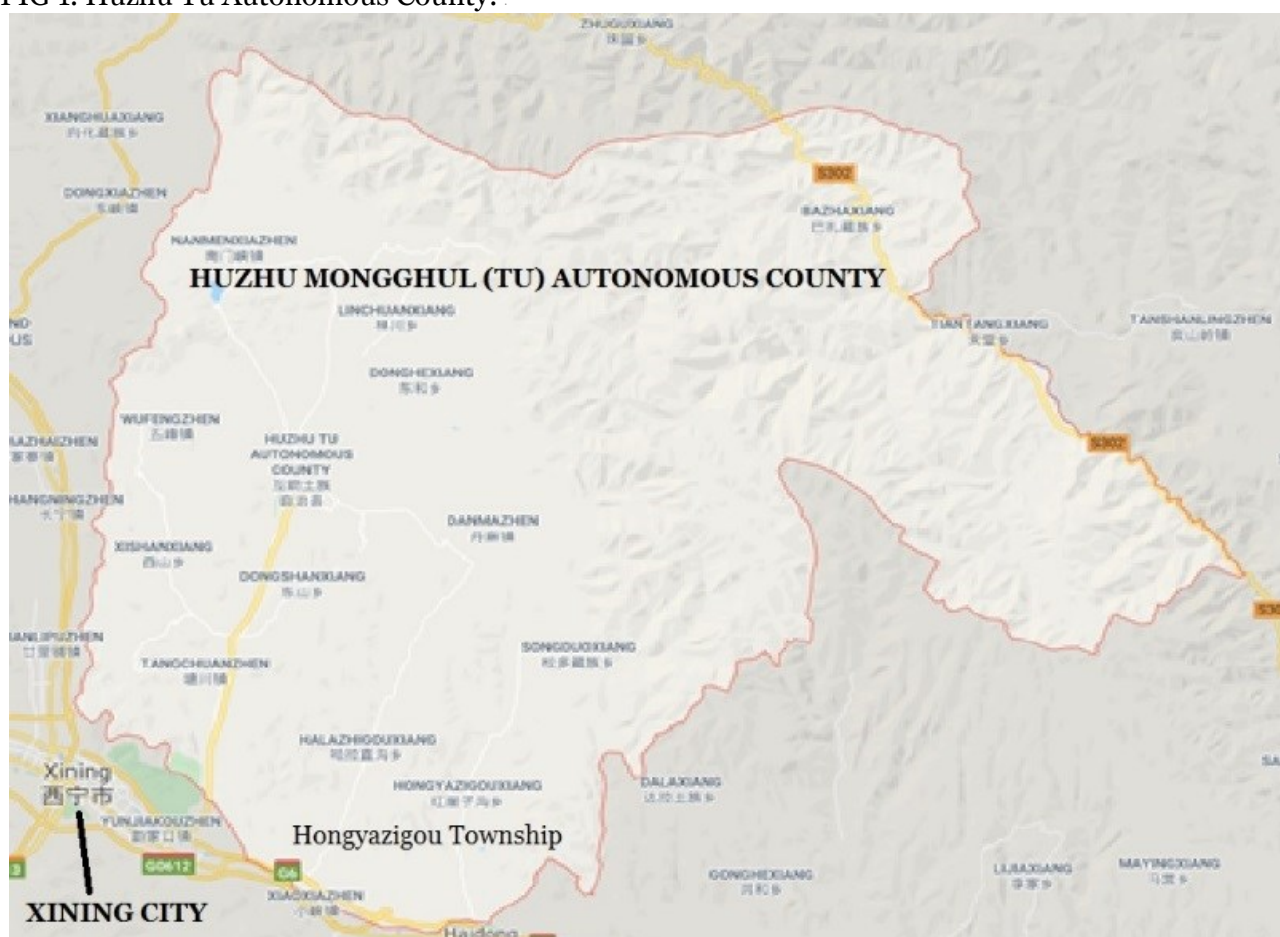
Lajangja Mongghul Village is in a steep mountain region of the northern part of Hongyazigou Township, Huzhu Tu Autonomous County, Haidong Municipality, Qinghai Province, PR China. With twenty-five households and approximately one hundred Mongghul residents, it is one of the most remote Mongghul villages in Huzhu County. The focus of this paper is a village household that, in 2019, used mules to plow. Two maps and three photographs are provided.

KEYWORDS

Tu, Mongghul, Monguor, Qinghai agriculture, fields, Huzhu, Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau

LOCATION

FIG 1. Huzhu Tu Autonomous County.¹



* Limusishiden (Li Dechun). 2021. The Last Mongghul Plowman in 2019: Huzhu County, Qinghai Province, PR China. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 60:345-351.

¹ An edited version of <https://bit.ly/3aJ3QXb>, accessed 9 March 2020.

FIG 2. Lajangja Village.¹

INTRODUCTION

Mongghul² historically used mules, horses, donkeys, and oxen to plow, transport goods and agricultural produce, and thresh crops.³ Livestock were essential in their daily work activities.

After the 1980s, tractors, seeders, harvesters, automobiles, and other machinery were introduced and gradually replaced animals in agricultural work. Additionally, hard-surfaced roads connected villages, running water came to many rural households, and solar-powered street lights illuminated rural village life.

In the spring of 2019, only one Mongghul family plowed fields with a pair of mules in Lajangja Village, Hongyazigou Township, Huzhu County. This article explores why this family still uses livestock in farming.

In 2019, I interviewed Yangbin (b. 1961, male, illiterate) from Lajangja Village. He rarely leaves his village. In 2019, he was the last Mongghul plowing fields with livestock in Mongghul communities. I recorded my interview with him using an audio recorder. Later, as I listened to this material again, I took notes in Mongghul and then wrote this text in English:

My name is Yangbin. I dropped out after one year in our village primary school. That was in the year my father, Qijangrinqan (~1922-1970), died when I was about nine years old. I don't know what illness he had, but he died very suddenly. I then left school and worked at home because my family needed me.

¹ An edited version of <https://bit.ly/39TDkcC>, accessed 9 March 2020.

² Mongghul terms are given in the Mongghul written system (Li 1988:9).

³ See Schram (2006 [1954-1961]) for brief comments on Monguor agriculture in the early twentieth century.

My mother (Gajii, 1923~1996) died from a bad cold.

I have one sibling, an elder sister (Fushinhua, b. ~1946), who attended the same elementary school I did for a short time. Later, she married and moved into her husband's home in Xangri Village, which neighbors our village. My wife (Wumu, b. 1964) is illiterate and is unable to speak Chinese.

I have two sons. The eldest, Hunligha Cairang (b. 1988), had to tend our livestock after he finished primary school. My younger son, Zhaxi Cairang (b. 1991), finished middle school. My sons met their future wives (who are cousins, Tibetan, and from Sangsang (T, Bzangbzang) Township, Angren (T, Ngam ring) County, Rikaza (T, Gzhis ka rtse) City) when they were working in the Tibet Autonomous Region. Hunligha Cairang's wife is Zhualimaxji (b.1986), and Zhaxi Cairang's wife is Zhualimahua (b. 1991). In 2008, the two women came with my sons to Lajangja Village. They were unable to speak Chinese very well, but they learned Mongghul and spoke it fluently. In 2017, after nine years here in the village, they suddenly left and returned to their parents' homes in Tibet. We don't know why they left.

Hunligha Cairang's oldest son is Bughadanzhu (b. 2009), and his daughter is Layahua (b.2010). Zhaxi Cairang's son is Bughaniruu (b. 2011), and his daughter is Sairanghua (b. 2012). All four grandchildren now attend our village primary school.

I have twenty *mu*¹ of farmland. Ten *mu* are planted to grass as a result of the Returning Farmland to Forest policy.

Every morning, I get up early, wash my face, and offer incense in my courtyard. After I escort the grandchildren to school, I take my two mules to a pool of water so they can drink. Next, I take them to graze on the mountain slopes, tie them to a stake in the ground with long ropes, and go home. Every few hours, I return to the mules and move them to a new place to graze. I pick up my grandchildren when school ends and escort them back home.

INTERVIEW

Limusishiden (Li): Where have you been in your life Mr. Yangbin?

Yangbin: I have worked in Maduo County, Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, and in Ge'ermu City.

Li: Why do you still plow with mules? Why don't you use a tractor like other people?

Yangbin: Since I was a child, I herded sheep, horses, cattle, and mules. A couple of years ago, I sold all my livestock except for two mules, which I used to plow. The key reason is that I don't want to part with the mules. I am accustomed to tending livestock. It gives me something to do. Otherwise, my life would be less enjoyable. I only use the mules to plow some steep fields. I plow the other fields with a tractor. Some years ago, my sons urged me to sell the two mules, but I refused. Life is more meaningful if a Mongghul family's courtyard has the same livestock that our ancestors had.

Li: Do you only use the mules to plow? Do you use then them to haul things or thresh crops?

Yangbin: These days, they are only used to plow steep fields. We haul things using a tractor and harvest grain in a few hours using a mechanical harvester. Today, no one uses threshing grounds to thresh crops.

Li: How many families live in your village? What are the villagers' lives today?

Yangbin: There are twenty-five households and about one hundred people. About twenty families have locked their front gates and moved to urban areas, mostly Xining, where they work as street and park cleaners; gatekeepers at various work units, companies, parking lots; and restaurant waitresses. They earn more than farmers and rarely return to their homes here. Some come to inspect their home two or three times a year but don't stay even one night. The five households in the village where people live today are older adults who care for children. It is a heavy burden for

¹ One *mu* equals 666.6 square meters, 0.067 hectares, or 0.16 acres.

parents if their children study in Xining, where school fees are high. I predict our village will soon be deserted.

Li: How is your life here in your village? Do you enjoy living here?

Yangbin: Now there are only several old people, a couple of disabled people, and about ten children in our village. It feels empty. Only these people stay in this village and this deep valley. Our home is so remote that peddlers don't come here to sell goods. My wife and I would like to work in Xining to make a living, but our four grandchildren need to study in our village. We must take care of them.

CONCLUSION

Historically, each Mongghul family raised swine, dogs, cats, chickens, sheep, goats, cattle, horses, mules, and donkeys. Surplus livestock were sold, as were eggs, sheep, and goat hair. Cattle, horses, mules, and donkeys were used to plow, transport goods and agricultural produce, and thresh crops. Livestock manure was also collected and used as crop fertilizer.

Pigeons nested under the roofs of homes, symbolizing happiness and auspiciousness. Mongghul fed them and did not disturb or drive them away.

Women got up in the early morning, put the chickens out of the chicken roost, and fed them and the pigeons by sprinkling highland barley or wheat seeds in the courtyard, and fed the pigs and dogs. The men drove the sheep, goats, cattle, horses, mules, and donkeys outside to graze. At dusk, the livestock were driven back home.

The family removed chicken excrement from the courtyard at least twice a day. Animal manure was collected in baskets and poured outside the home on a manure pile. The manure was later taken to fields before plowing and seeding. Horse, donkey, and mule manure was carried outside, dried, and used as fuel.

In 2020, an increasing number of villages were deserted as residents leave to work in urban areas, signaling an end to traditional Mongghul lifeways.

PHOTOGRAPHS

FIG 3. Yangbin and his wife, Wumu (31 March 2019, Jugui).



FIG 4. Yangbin and his wife, Wumu (31 March 2019, Jugui).



FIG 5. Yangbin, Wumu, Limusishiden, and the couple's four grandchildren (31 March 2019, Jugui).



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NON-ENGLISH TERMS¹

'jam dbyangs skyabs འཇམ་དབྱངས་སྐྱམས།

Angren 昂仁, ngam ring ངམ་རིང་། County

Bughadanzhu, 'phags pa don grub འཕགས་པ་དོན་གྲུབ། a person's name

Bughaniruu, 'phags pa nor bu འཕགས་པ་ནོར་བུ། a person's name

Fushinhua, a person's name

Gajii, a person's name

Ge'ermu 格尔木 City

Golok, Guoluo 果洛, mgo log མགོ་ལོག་ Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture

Haidong 海东 City

Hongyazigou 红崖子沟 Township

Hunligha Cairang, a person's name

Huzhu 互助 County

Limusishiden, klu 'bum tshe brtan ལྷ་འབུམ་ཚེ་བརྟན།, Li Dechun 李得春, a person's names

Lajangja, Xiaogou 小沟 Village

Layahua, a person's name

Maduo 玛多, rma stod མ་སྟོད། County

Mongghul, Monguor, Mangghuer, Tu 土

mu 亩, unit of land measurement; one hectare equals fifteen *mu*

Qijangrinqan, chos skyong rin chen ཚོས་སྐྱོང་རིན་ཆེན། a person's name

Qinghai 青海 Province

Rikaza 日喀则, gzhis ka rtse གཞིས་ཀ་རྩེ། City

Sairanghua, Tshi ring dpal ཚེ་རིང་དཔལ། a person's name

Sangsang 桑桑, bzang bzang བཟང་བཟང། Township

Skal bzang nor bu སྐལ་བཟང་ནོར་བུ།

Tu 土 Monguor, Mongghul, Mangghuer

Wumu, a person's name

Xangri, Shenlu 神路 Village

Xining 西宁 City, the capital of Qinghai Province

Yangbin, g.yang 'bum གཡམ་འབུམ། a person's name

Zhaxi Cairang, bkra shis tshe ring བཀ་ཤིས་ཚེ་རིང། a person's name

Zhualimahua, tra klu mo dpa' ཅ་ལུ་མོ་དཔལ། a person's name

Zhualimaxji, tra klu mo skyid ཅ་ལུ་མོ་སྐྱིད། a person's name

¹ I thank Skal bzang nor bu and 'Jam dbyangs skyabs for writing the Tibetan.